



HOPE SANDROW:

*water life*

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Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris

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This brochure accompanies the exhibition "Hope Sandrow: Water Life,"  
organized by Eugenie Tsai, associate curator and curator of branches,  
Whitney Museum of American Art. The essay was written by  
Bruce W. Ferguson, executive director, New York Academy of Art,  
Graduate School of Figurative Art.

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New York, NY 10021

Front cover:

*Water, Clouds, Evergreen*, 1998, from the series *Time*  
Ink-jet print, 40 ½ x 26 ¾ in (102.9 x 67.9 cm)  
Collection of the artist

Back cover:

*Sun, Clouds, Water*, 1998, from the series *Time*  
Ink-jet print, 40 ½ x 26 ¾ in (102.9 x 67.9 cm)  
Collection of the artist

## *introduction*

*Water Life* features Hope Sandrow's first series of color photographs, figures suspended in swaths of brilliant blue, in a merging of sea and sky. The fluid quality of the photos, shot underwater, is partly due to the buoyancy of the camera. Sandrow began to shoot this series in June 1997, on the southern shore of Long Island at Mecox Bay, near Water Mill. An avid swimmer and gardener, she has spent much time there for more than twenty years; it is her refuge from the city. Sandrow recently explained the genesis of the series:

*While photographing the images, I am moved by the water currents, and because of the slow shutter speed the images are blurred, and the water movements cause the images to show below and above within the same frame. It's a fabulous shooting experience because as I move with the currents my body becomes one with the image—I become part of the act, rather than merely observing it. The movement of the water controls me, rather than my controlling the shooting—and it's one reason I love to be in the water as it's where I let go and just "be."*

The resulting color prints are part of a series entitled *Time*, the last in a trilogy that opened with *Memories* and *Spaces*. An earlier part of the *Time* series includes ethereal black-and-white images of swimmers printed on handmade paper. Sandrow had always wanted to work in color, and deliberately chose blue because of its reference to the modernist tradition—to the Blue Period paintings of Picasso and the Blue Monochrome series by Yves Klein.

The second part of the *Water Life* installation comprises ninety-three rectangular cardboard boxes containing thousands of spiral snail shells, collected from an Atlantic Ocean beach near the Mecox Bay Inlet. On a visit to the area last fall, Sandrow unexpectedly found herself walking on shells. She realized she was witnessing an unusual phenomenon in which thousands of snails had been caught up in a current and were washing up onto the beach. After filling large trash bags with snails, she spent long hours boiling and cleaning the shells.



*Within a Golden Rectangle: Moon Snail shells, numbering almost 10,000. Found November 12, 1997, washing up on the beach near the Mecox Bay Inlet to the Atlantic Ocean, 1998. Installation view*



For the next few months, in a labor of love, she devoted herself to oiling and numbering each one, arranging them neatly in boxes according to color, size, and shape—and marveling at their distinct individual beauty. At last count, the boxes contained nearly ten thousand shells.

Sandrow is fascinated by the relationship of the spiral shape of the shells to the golden rectangle, a set of proportions said to have been discovered by the Greek artist Phidias, which results

in harmonious compositions and relationships. Having discovered that the proportions of the cardboard boxes she had chosen for the shells corresponded to those of the golden rectangle, she decided to stack the boxes so that the floor space they occupied in the exhibition would also correspond to the proportions of the golden rectangle.

In *Water Life*, the combination of photographs and shells evokes Mecox Bay, a site of harmonious reconciliation between people and nature, and a place of personal healing for the artist. Despite the apparent contradiction between the world of nature represented in Sandrow's art and the overtly urban environment of the Whitney Museum at Philip Morris, the artist draws connections between the two realms. Reading about the history of midtown Manhattan, she discovered that the area was once a marshy meadowland, with rocky bluffs and streams. A river ran northwest from Kips Bay past where the Whitney Museum at Philip Morris currently stands. There was, moreover, an abundance of shellfish in the area. A third element of the installation, the sound of running water, audible in some parts of the gallery, evokes this river that might still run through the depths beneath the Museum. With this recording, Sandrow invites us to imagine what Manhattan was like in the past, when its flora and fauna resembled that of present-day Mecox Bay.

Sandrow is known for establishing the Artist and Homeless Collaborative in 1990. Working with homeless women in a shelter on Park Avenue, she invited well-known artists to the shelter to work with residents on a variety of projects. These collaborations offered the women opportunities to meet and talk, express themselves, and make their voices heard. Sandrow is one of a number of artists in the late eighties and early nineties who felt that art should reach a broader spectrum of people than those who frequent museums.

While involved with the Collaborative, Sandrow, who was trained as a photographer, continued to produce her own art. Many of her photographic series—*Men on the Street* (1979–81), *Back on the Streets* (1982–84), *Museum Studies* (1985–90)—address issues of both personal and institutional power. Some of



her photographs examine the role of water in purification rituals and in the natural environment.

At the center of Sandrow's work is the subject of the body. In *Memories* (1993), photographs of the fragmented body—torsos and hands—suggest indelible afterimages of brutality. The most self-consciously autobiographical of Sandrow's work, the series alludes to rape and sexual assault. In *Spaces* (1994), the body fragments are given religious connotations, outstretched arms suggesting crucifixion or supplication. In both *Memories* and *Spaces*, Sandrow “skinned” the shiny emulsion from the photographic paper to heighten the effect of fragility and pain. In the initial black-and-white images of *Time*, swimmers often appear with outstretched arms. Unlike the looming body fragments on a blank ground in the two earlier series, the small figures of *Time* float in a luminous, aquatic environment. With the recent addition of color photographs to the *Time* series, Sandrow summons the transcendent feeling she experiences while immersed in water. The photographs and the shells in *Water Life* evoke not merely a place of extraordinary beauty in the natural world, but a place of personal significance, where Sandrow can be born anew, whole and unbroken.

*spirit matters*

Moral principles are sometimes at stake in the strange and uncanny objects we call art. In Hope Sandrow's case, this moral contingency is worn on the sleeve of the medium, of the process, of the subject, and of the artist. Whether she is working collectively with homeless women, students, or other artists, or alone in the studio, Sandrow's work habits, her subjects, and her art deliberately and conscientiously thrust the viewer into an ethical realm.

Like that of other obviously moral artists (Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, Krzysztof Wodiczko, among others), Sandrow's understanding of art as a site for a change of consciousness is always close to the surface. But, and it is an important but, Sandrow is not attempting to produce a critical subject, which is the aim of much political and activist art, as much as she is trying to produce an undecidable subject. Her viewers are gently led away from prior assumptions rather than exploded from within in a dramatic stroke of transformation, which is the goal of much avant-garde art. By this I mean that her artistic and social oscillation from the personal to the political, the mantra of feminist and, now, postmodern art in general, is colored by a poetics of materials and process which is, finally, benevolent rather than extreme or sensational. She is not didactic, then, in the degraded moralistic sense, but corporeal and experiential in her artmaking of morals. She hopes and longs for change rather than demands or expects it from an artwork.<sup>1</sup>

And this displacement from the demand for a shift in consciousness to a "gentling" of a shift in consciousness is inherent in Sandrow's controlling metaphoric process, which, I would argue, is an ecology of the human spirit.<sup>2</sup> And the key word in this description is "process," as Sandrow's work is inherently involved in process, not finish. To extract her parts from the whole is to be lured into an aesthetic discourse and to perform the injustice of seeing the work dissociated from the ecological necessity of spirit which informs it. For whether Sandrow is working on a project under a bridge in Brooklyn, in a homeless shelter in uptown Manhattan, in a gallery in Winston-Salem,

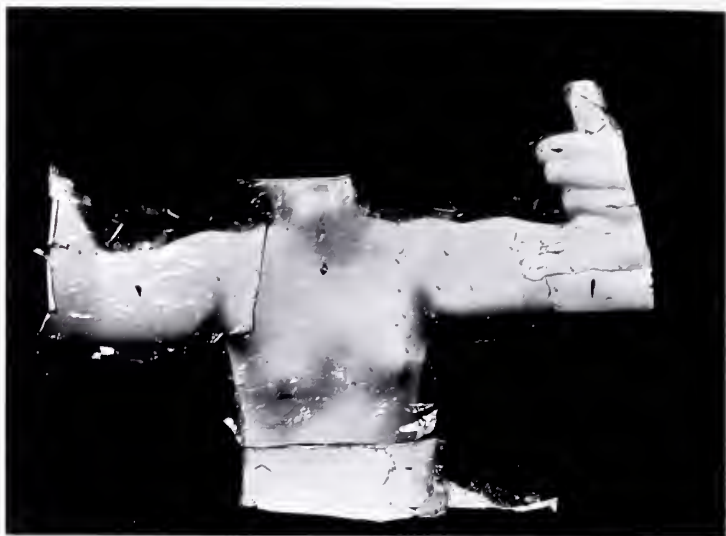


North Carolina, or for a traditional commercial show, her governing method is one of a triangulated dialectic in which the whole is only the sum of its parts and the parts are never the total experience.

The signature exemplars of this process of ecological intention are the three series *Memories*, *Spaces*, and *Time*. In *Memories*, for instance, the body, having been photographed, is distorted, crumpled, and extended by literally peeling off the skin of the silver print—its emulsion—and reconstructing the body parts, which are then pinned to the wall. The original impassive images undergo a procedural violence akin to a real bodily violence. Although they become powerful images of injury, they metonymically introduce and reproduce the rupture they reference. This is a traditional avant-garde procedure, a Brechtian device of alienation and a desire to translocate experience to a viewer's own body through empathetic transfer. Unlike a photograph of a body for voyeuristic contemplation, the bodies in Sandrow's selflike images are corporeal and visceral and almost achieve the state of three-dimensional reproduction. Torn and vulnerable, almost all of them reach out to the viewer for a sympathetic embrace, conjuring nothing less than the image as cringing victim.



*Untitled VI (Skinned)*, 1992, from the series *Memories*  
Gelatin silver print fragments, 45 x 68 in. (114.3 x 172.7 cm)  
Collection of C. B. Engelhard



*Untitled VI*, 1994, from the series *Spaces*  
Gelatin silver print fragments, 48  $\frac{1}{4}$  x 64 in. (123.2 x 162.6 cm)  
Collection of the artist

In *Spaces*, the next stage or act in this particular morality tale, the images undergo a nearly equivalent physical torture before being installed. But here they begin to suggest a possible reconciliation. Rather than bodies alone, the images are also from art history—images which are already representations or icons of the collective imagination and memory. Out of the debris of historical culture, new images emerge—images which suggest reconstruction, rehabilitation, and renewal. Art history serves as a reminder, not only of the violence of history, but of the memories which are both possible and potentially replenishable. This is hope, or, at least, its dormant possibility. Bodies here are eternal and continuous, even if distressed and worn. From *Memories* to *Spaces*, we travel from metonymy to metaphor—from frozen literality to the abstract amplitude of expectancy. There is a palpable reach in these depicted hands and arms, away from the closed position of intimate pain to the more artless position of social possibility. And it is art, in both cases, which acts as a therapeutic process for crossing over from one to the other.

In *Time*, the most abstract and the most complex of the series, both the body of *Memories* and the condition of *Spaces* come together in images and materials in which a redemptive hypotenuse is offered. Water, the symbol of both flux and gravity, overflows and overwhelms the body. Nature, of both body and



*Untitled XIX*, 1997, from the series *Time*  
 Iris print, 26 x 39 in. (66 x 99.1 cm)  
 Equitable Life Assurance Society  
 of the U.S., New York

*Untitled XIII*, 1997, from the series *Time*  
 Iris print, 39 x 26 in. (99.1 x 66 cm)  
 Private collection



world, is presented as redemption. The body finds itself floating in a space which is uncontrollable, immense, and immeasurable. This is the body freed, the body suspended, and the body unviolated. Neither nature nor culture betrayed. As in all of Sandrow's work, this is redemption through accumulation, the best achievements of hard work, the possibility of the spiritual through materiality, the singularity of an image by virtue of the multiplicity of images of likeness.

And then comes the snail. The ideal body. Already its own redemption. Already its own consummation. Already its own ecology. Already a body which is a home and a wont and a habit. Each individualized and each a part of a greater whole. A series which is also a unit.

## Notes

1. I take the name Hope to be emblematic of the artist's thematics. And this is not a coy assumption, nor is it mine alone. Not only does Sandrow acknowledge the place in her life of her name, but it has also been noticed by others. "For Arlette Petty, the Artist and Homeless Collaborative 'gave me hope. Hope for the future...and also I was lucky enough to meet Hope Sandrow. So it turned out to be the most positive thing that happened to me in the shelter. It's sort of like a double hope.'" See Andrea Wolper, "Making Art, Reclaiming Lives: The Artist and Homeless Collaborative," in Nina Felshin, ed., *But Is It Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995) p. 282.

2. "Gentling," as I understand it, is a term used to describe a way of developing a relationship to a horse through bodily choreography, and is opposed to "breaking" a horse, the traditional macho method of Western cowboy mythology and reality. "Gentling," which is today becoming more popular as a method of horse-handling, is based on establishing a principle of trust and was introduced in the nineteenth century by women.







*Within a Golden Rectangle: Moon Snail shells, numbering almost 10,000. Found November 12, 1997, washing up on the beach near the Mecox Bay Inlet to the Atlantic Ocean, 1998. Installation details*





*Nature Monochrome IX: Reconstruction*, 1995. Gelatin silver print fragments, papyrus, twine, framed photographs, and cardboard boxes, dimensions variable. Installation view, Art in the Anchorage, New York



HOPE SANDROW

Born in Philadelphia, 1951

Philadelphia College of Art (1972–74)

Lives and works in New York City and Long Island, New York

### **Selected One-Artist Exhibitions**

- 1983** Oggi Domani, New York
- 1988** Gracie Mansion Gallery, New York
- 1990** Gracie Mansion Gallery, New York
- 1991** The Grey Art Gallery and Study Center,  
New York University Art Collection, New York
- 1995** The Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art,  
Winston-Salem, North Carolina, "Fragments:  
Self/History"
- 1997** University of the Arts, Philadelphia

### **Selected Group Exhibitions**

- 1982** Gracie Mansion Gallery, New York, "Famous"
- 1986** Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian  
Institution, Washington, D.C., "Directions 1986"
- 1987** Whitney Museum of American Art at Equitable Center,  
New York, "Contemporary Diptychs: Divided Visions"
- 1989** National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian  
Institution, Washington, D.C., "The Photography of  
Invention"
- 1993** Whitney Museum of American Art, New York,  
"The Subject of Rape"
- 1995** Art in the Anchorage, Creative Time, New York,  
"Material Matters"
- 1997** Hebrew Union College, New York, "Rage/Resolution:  
From Family Violence to Healing in the Works of Israeli  
and American Women"

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Dimensions are in inches, followed by centimeters.  
Height precedes width. All works are in the collection  
of the artist.

All works are from the series *Time*.

*Clouds, Sea Gulls*, 1998. Ink-jet print,  
26  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 40  $\frac{1}{2}$  (67.9 x 102.9)

*Clouds, Trees, Water*, 1998. Ink-jet print,  
40  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 26  $\frac{3}{4}$  (102.9 x 67.9)

*Cloud, Water*, 1998. Ink-jet print,  
40  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 26  $\frac{3}{4}$  (102.9 x 67.9)

*Clouds, Water*, 1998. Ink-jet print,  
26  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 40  $\frac{1}{2}$  (67.9 x 102.9)

*Purple Marlins, Water*, 1998. Ink-jet print,  
26  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 40  $\frac{1}{2}$  (67.9 x 102.9)

*Sea Gulls*, 1998. Ink-jet print,  
40  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 26  $\frac{3}{4}$  (102.9 x 67.9)

*Sky, Clouds, Water*, 1998. Ink-jet print,  
40  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 26  $\frac{3}{4}$  (102.9 x 67.9)

*Sun, Clouds, Water*, 1998. Ink-jet print,  
40  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 26  $\frac{3}{4}$  (102.9 x 67.9)

*Sun, Sky, Water*, 1998. Ink-jet print,  
40  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 26  $\frac{3}{4}$  (102.9 x 67.9)

*Three Clouds*, 1998. Ink-jet print,  
40  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 26  $\frac{3}{4}$  (102.9 x 67.9)

*Two Sea Gulls*, 1998. Ink-jet print,  
26  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 40  $\frac{1}{2}$  (67.9 x 102.9)

*Two Swans*, 1998. Ink-jet print,  
40  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 26  $\frac{3}{4}$  (102.9 x 67.9)

*Water*, 1998. Ink-jet print,  
26  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 40  $\frac{1}{2}$  (67.9 x 102.9)

*Water, Clouds*, 1998. Ink-jet print,  
26  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 40  $\frac{1}{2}$  (67.9 x 102.9)

*Water, Clouds, Evergreen*, 1998.  
Ink-jet print, 40  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 26  $\frac{3}{4}$  (102.9 x 67.9)

*Wave*, 1998. Ink-jet print,  
26  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 40  $\frac{1}{2}$  (67.9 x 102.9)

*"We know that the island is no longer young; that the laughing streams and smiling valleys which once dimpled its face have given place to the countless hard wrinkles, called streets; but...the memory of its rippling waters is still an everflowing spring of pleasure,"* 1998. (Passage quoted from George Everett Hill and George E. Waring, Jr., "Old Wells and Watercourses of the Island of Manhattan," 1899.) Sound recording, continuous loop. Sound engineer: Ulf Skogsbergh

*Within a Golden Rectangle: Moon Snail shells, numbering almost 10,000. Found November 12, 1997, washing up on the beach near the Mecox Bay Inlet to the Atlantic Ocean*, 1998. Moon Snail shells and cardboard, dimensions variable

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